

A Comprehensive History of Delhi's Brothels and Courtesans

Origins and Meaning of Mujra

The term *Mujra* originates from Persian, meaning *salutation* or *greeting*. During the Mughal era, when a person wished to enter a royal court or assembly, it was customary to offer a respectful *mujra*. In the Mughal courts, when a courtesan (known as *tawaif*) began her dance, she would first bow and offer salutations, saying, “Sir, I present my *mujra*.” Over time, the word *mujra* evolved to mean a performance involving singing and dancing, and the performers came to be known as *mujrewalas*.

Mujra as an art form combined elements of classical Kathak dance with Hindustani classical music, including thumris and ghazals. These performances were not merely entertainment but a refined cultural practice, often passed down through generations of courtesan families. The courtesans held significant cultural influence, with some noble families sending their sons to them to learn etiquette, poetry, and the art of conversation⁶.

The Role and Status of Courtesans in Colonial Delhi

Courtesans in colonial India, particularly in cities like Delhi and Lucknow, occupied a unique social position. They were highly cultured women, trained in music, dance, poetry, and refined manners. Unlike common prostitutes, courtesans were respected as custodians of art and culture, often enjoying patronage from aristocrats, wealthy merchants, and government officials²⁵.

Their kothas (residences) were centers of cultural activity where music, dance, poetry recitals, and intellectual discussions flourished. Courtesans wielded considerable social power, often influencing politics and society through their patrons. However, with the advent of British colonial rule, the status of courtesans began to decline. Victorian morality imposed by the British equated courtesans with prostitutes, stigmatizing their art and lifestyle. Laws such as the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 targeted them under the guise of controlling venereal diseases among British troops, subjecting many to intrusive medical examinations and legal restrictions⁴⁷.

Historical Development of Brothels in Delhi: From Mughal to British Era

Before British consolidation, Delhi had several red-light areas or kothas scattered across the city. The old city of Shahjahanabad was surrounded by walls with bastions, one of which was named after a British officer, Garstin Bastion. During the British Raj, the commissioner Garstin Bastion consolidated the five main red-light areas into one concentrated zone along what came to be known as Garstin Bastion Road, or GB Road (officially Swami Shradhanand Marg since 1966). This area became the largest red-light district in Delhi, housing approximately 100 brothels and over a thousand sex workers¹.

The courtesans of Delhi, especially in areas like Chawri Bazaar and later GB Road, were known for their elaborate dress, charm, and artistic skills. They were integral to social ceremonies such as weddings, births, and festivals, where their mujra performances added grandeur and cultural richness. The courtesans' kothas were often lavishly decorated, and their lifestyle was marked by a blend of elegance and social complexity.

Notable Courtesans and Their Legacy

Among the famous courtesans of early 20th-century Delhi were Duanni Jan and Chavanni Jan, sisters related to the family of Naushaba Begum, mother of politician Sikandar Bakht. Their kotha was located in what is now the site of Hotel Taj and Vakil Hotel. These courtesans were known for attracting elite patrons and were celebrated for their wit and cultural sophistication.

The courtesan tradition also included tales of poetic exchanges and social influence. For example, a story is told of a stammering Mughal man, Mirza Chapati, whose poetry deeply moved Duanni Jan, illustrating the intellectual and artistic milieu of the courtesan world.

By 1947, courtesans like Moti Jan and Nosaba Jan were still active in Delhi, maintaining the refined traditions of their predecessors. However, the post-independence era saw the decline of these cultural bastions as social attitudes shifted and legal restrictions increased⁴.

The Mosque Built by a Courtesan

A unique historical anecdote relates to a mosque in Chawri Bazaar named Masjid Nawab Rukn-ud-Daula. It is said to have been funded by a courtesan who wished to remain anonymous, as money earned through courtesanship was considered impure in Islamic law. The mosque was therefore built under the name of Nawab Rukn-ud-Daula, a nobleman who supported the project.

Transition and Decline Post-Independence

After India's independence in 1947, the traditional mujra culture and courtesan lifestyle rapidly declined. Many courtesans moved to the film industry or settled into mainstream society. The red-light areas shifted from Chawri Bazaar to GB Road, where courtesans like Maya Devi from Shimla gained fame for their performances.

Over time, the profession faced increasing stigma and legal challenges. The art of mujra became associated with vulgarity and was often conflated with prostitution, losing its earlier cultural status. The rise of modern entertainment and changing social norms contributed to the fading of the courtesan tradition⁴⁶.

GB Road Today: The Largest Red-Light District in Delhi

GB Road remains the largest red-light district in Delhi, with about 100 brothels and an estimated 1,000 sex workers. It is lined with multi-storey buildings that house shops on the ground floor and brothels on the upper floors, opening after business hours. The area's name

derives from British commissioner Garstin Bastion, who consolidated Delhi's red-light zones during colonial rule¹.

The district has seen significant changes in recent decades. Rising property prices have led to many brothels being converted into shops or warehouses. Crime and safety concerns have also impacted the clientele. The Central Reserve Police Force and local authorities have installed CCTV cameras to curb crime, following incidents of violence¹.

Organizations such as *Indians for Sexual Liberty* have advocated for the rights of sex workers on GB Road. In 2022, following their efforts, the Supreme Court of India decriminalized prostitution, marking a significant legal shift for sex workers' rights in the country

Broader Social and Cultural Context

The courtesan tradition in India was complex and multifaceted. Courtesans were not only entertainers but also custodians of culture, education, and social etiquette. Their kothas served as spaces for artistic expression and intellectual exchange, often providing women with a degree of autonomy rare in patriarchal society²⁵⁸.

Colonialism brought profound disruptions. The British administration's Victorian morality led to the marginalization of courtesans, conflating them with prostitutes and imposing strict regulations. This shift was part of a broader colonial project that sought to control and redefine Indian social and gender norms³⁷⁸.

Despite these challenges, the legacy of courtesans endures in Indian classical music, dance, poetry, and cultural memory. Their contributions to the arts and society remain an important part of India's rich historical tapestry.

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